



U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

Neal Smith National Wildlife Refuge

Draft Comprehensive Conservation Plan

Project Update / April 2011

Thank You for Participating!

Comprehensive Conservation Planning is an exciting opportunity for field stations to update their current management plans and strategies, focus on the future within a specific time frame and bring the best out of the people who have a passion for all things wild. I am very happy to return to Neal Smith NWR at this time, having served here nine years ago as the Assistant Refuge Manager, to finalize the upcoming draft Comprehensive Conservation Plan (CCP) and help set the tone and direction of the refuge for the next fifteen years. I welcome the opportunity to continue good programs and incorporate constructive change at every level to make good things happen on the ground. The draft CCP will be available later this year and I look forward to hearing from you.

*Christy Smith
Refuge Manager*

Planning for the Future

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is developing a Comprehensive Conservation Plan (CCP) for Neal Smith National Wildlife Refuge (NWR). The CCP will guide overall refuge management and ensure that actions comply with the purposes for which the refuge was established and with other laws and policies. It serves as a “road map” for refuge staff and allows for more consistent management. It also provides for public involvement and participation.

Since 2009, Neal Smith NWR staff has gathered comments regarding issues and opportunities facing the refuge. Information was posted on the internet, distributed to local media and mailed to more than 400 interested individuals and groups

explaining the CCP process and requesting input on the future of the refuge. Comments were submitted in writing and at public open house meetings. The refuge also convened a workshop with local officials, conservation partners, educators, and scientists to share diverse knowledge and perspectives related to refuge issues.

This update summarizes the comments received and describes the primary management issues we will consider as we develop feasible alternatives for the future. We would like to thank everyone who provided comments and we look forward to the next round of discussions. Your participation has been, and continues to be, very valuable.



What are the Key Issues?

How will we effectively and sustainably restore prairie, savanna, and sedge meadow habitat?

Habitat restoration efforts already have provided for a diversity of life on the refuge including hundreds of native plant species, over 200 bird species, and dozens of mammals, reptiles, amphibians, and butterflies. Challenges that remain include native plant diversity, control of invasive non-native plants, effects of subsurface drainage and other watershed alterations on refuge lands, and disruption of the historic fire regime. Burning, grazing, mowing, farming and drain tile removal are management tools that can help us address these challenges. Our evaluation of options, trade-offs, and priorities for enhancing habitat restoration and management programs on the Refuge will be included in the Draft CCP.

Representative comments:

"The focus on prairie restoration and savanna ecosystems should be kept strong to maintain Iowa heritage..."

"The biggest challenge for the next 15 years is to effectively control invasive species."

"Develop core areas of habitat, both prairie and oak savanna, and expand their boundaries, eliminating inholdings, so the core area is as far as possible from non-target habitat."

"It appears from surveys done by Iowa's botanists that the missing ingredient is species diversity...This would greatly benefit wildlife diversity and...help to control invasive species."

"I would like to see the destruction of the forests halted."

"Consider re-meandering the creek, slowing down the water."

How will we maintain and enhance native wildlife populations on the refuge?

The Refuge seeks to protect, restore, and maintain biologically diverse populations of native wildlife associated with a healthy tallgrass prairie ecosystem. Many bird species that disappeared from the area due to habitat loss are already beginning to return as refuge lands are restored, including Henslow's sparrow, northern harrier, short-eared owl, upland sandpiper and others. Endangered Indiana bats have been found in refuge savannas. The regal fritillary, a prairie-dependent butterfly has been reestablished. Bison and elk were introduced to a fenced enclosure in the late 1990's to re-create the historic role of large grazers in maintaining diverse prairie and savanna habitat, to study their effects on the ecosystem, and as a learning tool for visitors. Our evaluation of options, trade-offs, and priorities for restoring and managing wildlife populations will be included in the Draft CCP.

Representative comments:

"...talk with the county to possibly decommission more of the roads and powerlines within refuge land...to create enough safe area to reintroduce the prairie chicken."

"The Refuge should promote biological diversity, with special concern for threatened and endangered species...The flora and fauna should reflect the natural heritage of Iowa...However, it may not always be practical to turn back the hands of time and return the land to its pure primitive beginnings."

"[Bison] will never be completely natural, but are an integral part of the Refuge and should remain."

"The most important function of the Refuge is to be a refuge for wildlife and plants; those that need space like this to

Draft VISION STATEMENT for the Future of Neal Smith National Wildlife Refuge

"The Refuge is a vast expanse of wind-swept prairie punctuated by sheltering oak savannas. Walnut Creek and its tributaries, bordered by sedge meadows, meander through the Refuge providing clean water for aquatic wildlife. Bound and connected to river systems to the north and south, the Refuge will form a sanctuary and corridor for prairie dependent wildlife species. These ecosystems are alive with a wide diversity of plants and wildlife that are thriving again. The processes that contribute to a healthy ecosystem include fire, grazing, nutrient cycling, pollination, and water filtration. These processes are working to improve life for plants, wildlife, and people. The picture of a landscape that existed before European-American settlement is renewed.

Guided by sound biological information and on-going research, this landscape continues to be rejuvenated through the dedicated work of staff, volunteers, and the support of the public and the many partners of the Refuge. People of all ages visit and contribute to the ongoing efforts. Visitors come to the Prairie Learning and Visitor Center to learn new concepts and to learn about and use new tools and methods to restore prairies. Visitors leave the refuge with a sense of belonging coupled with new knowledge of these ecosystems, a connection to the natural history of the region, and a desire to be involved in conservation. The refuge is an open laboratory where experts and laypersons alike share information to demonstrate how to restore and reconstruct tallgrass prairie, oak savanna, and sedge meadow."

survive civilization.”

“It’s about all the living things that depend on tallgrass prairie and oak savanna!”

How will we encourage more people to connect more closely with the Refuge while ensuring visitor safety and minimizing disturbance to wildlife and habitat?

Refuge visitation has averaged about 160,000 people annually over the past several years. Walking trails and an auto tour route are available for wildlife observation and prairie exploration; some visitors also like to experience the refuge off-trail. The Prairie Learning Center provides environmental education and interpretive programs for all ages. Part of the refuge is open to hunting. Visitors love the refuge and requests for additional activities are more than we can meet with current resources. The refuge must balance visitor services with concerns about safety and the potential for disturbance to wildlife and habitat. Our evaluation of options, trade-offs, and priorities for enhancing visitor services will be included in the Draft CCP.

Representative comments:

“Could there be more activities offered throughout the year?”

“Build a bike trail! Please!”

“I would like to see horses used and allowed on the refuge...”

“Neal Smith can and should play a vital role in the community as an environmental education leader.”

“Neal Smith currently closes all hunting seasons on the closing day of pheasant season...I would propose a change to match up with state seasons...”

“Find a way to make more birds and animals...visible to visitors.”

“Any improvements and activities which facilitate and encourage public access, use, and participation at the Refuge should be a significant part of the Plan.”

“As impassioned as I am about getting people involved in the refuge and wildlife conservation, I steadfastly maintain that on National Wildlife Refuges, wildlife should always come first.”

How will we improve our communication and community outreach efforts?

Communication and partnerships with area residents and local communities are crucial to the success of Neal Smith NWR. Refuge staff and volunteers provide current news and event information to the public through a quarterly newsletter, the *tallgrass.org* website, news releases sent to local media, presentations to community groups, and participation in the Prairie City Business Association.

Last year, local volunteers contributed more than 15,000 hours of service to Refuge programs. Volunteers staff the

visitor center, lead school groups and interpretive programs, and assist with special events. They help with invasive species control, greenhouse operations, seed harvest, and many other activities. An internship program supports local students interested in a natural resources career.

Our evaluation of options, trade-offs, and priorities for improving community outreach and involvement will be included in the Draft CCP.



Representative comments:

“Public outreach is crucial to getting local people involved and interested.”

“The refuge is such a wonderful thing to have in our community, but need to work more in developing a relationship with community entities and individuals, including getting and keeping local volunteers.”

“Over the last several years, community relations have gotten better, but there is still need for improvement.”

“There could be more outreach to the metro Des Moines community to involve people living in the city.”

“Promote, promote, promote – far and wide – the refuge and its purpose.”

“Take every opportunity to let people know the Neal Smith site exists.”

“Publicize great stories about a great place.”

“...need a greater emphasis on promoting events and public relations.”

“Work with government officials in creating “niche” marketing strategies that promote both the community and the refuge.”

“Anything the plan can do to let people know what you have here is very important.”

How will we address conservation concerns related to urban development and loss of wildlife habitat outside the refuge boundary?

The refuge is located in a primarily rural area just 20 miles east of urban Des Moines. Development is increasing rapidly near the refuge as the city and suburbs expand. Our long-term ability to restore and sustain native vegetation and wildlife communities on refuge lands depends in part on the integrity of the surrounding landscape. As more agricultural areas are developed, opportunities to influence land use decisions and reduce habitat fragmentation will become increasingly rare. Wildlife movement between the refuge and other protected areas will decrease. Many conservation options are available on private lands outside the refuge boundary including cooperative efforts with landowners, conservation easements, or fee acquisition from willing sellers in some cases. As real estate prices increase, however, all conservation options will likely become more

difficult to implement. Our evaluation of options, trade-offs and priorities for addressing regional conservation issues will be included in the draft CCP.

Representative comments:

"I feel that urban development poses a major threat to the refuge...I would hate to see the refuge as an island of prairie in the middle of a suburb!"

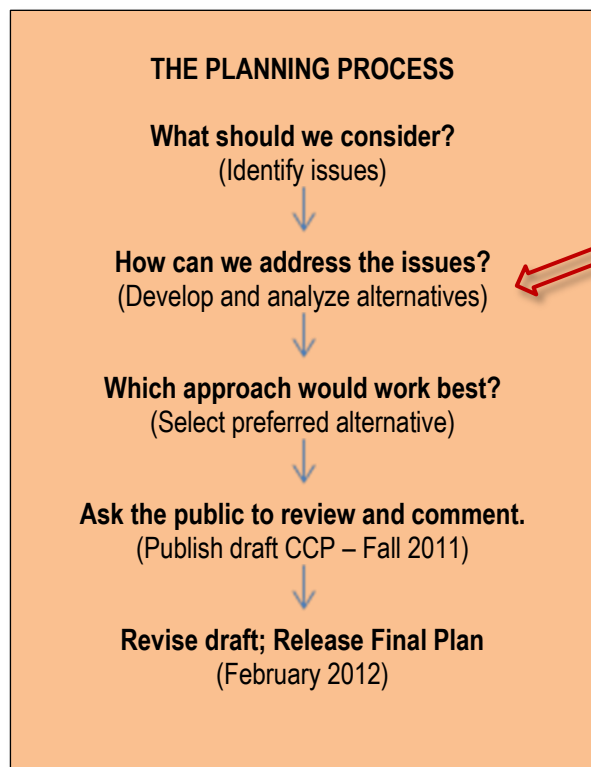
"With housing developments creeping ever closer to Refuge borders, it is most important to be in a position to purchase land for the Refuge as it becomes available. There needs to be a plan in place to fulfill the original vision of the Refuge."

"Encroachment will become increasingly problematic...I believe that additional area should be secured by easements or fee title to connect to other federal, state, and county lands within close proximity of the refuge...Once this land is developed the opportunity to establish such corridors will be lost forever."

What's Next?

We are now developing a range of management options that can help us address Refuge issues. The Draft CCP will describe the range of alternatives we've considered, analyze each one, and explain which alternative we prefer and why.

We anticipate that the Draft CCP will be available for public review and comment in Fall 2011. After public review and comment on the draft document, including public meetings, revisions will be made as needed, and the Final Plan will be prepared and distributed.



HOW TO STAY INVOLVED:

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